

Interview: Kimberly Peirce Discusses ‘The Godfather,’ Her New Crime Thriller

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CHICAGO – If Robert K. Elder’s book, “The Film That Changed My Life,” is indeed providing a blueprint for the screening series continuing this month at the Music Box, then cinephiles have every right to rejoice. Elder’s book interviewed a wide variety of filmmakers about the films that left a permanent impact on them, and the series reunites Elder and the filmmakers for screenings of their favorite films.

In June, the first installment featured Victor Fleming’s 1939 classic “The Wizard of Oz” hosted by irreverent super-fan John Waters. Now on Oct. 16, the series continues with filmmaker Kimberly Peirce, who will host a 3 p.m. screening of Francis Ford Coppola’s 1972 landmark, “The Godfather,” as well as a screening of her own 1999 masterwork “Boys Don’t Cry.” Though these films may seem as different as night and day, they both share thematic and stylistic similarities, not to mention an overwhelmingly visceral power. Peirce will also return to the University of Chicago on Oct. 19 to host a 5 p.m. panel discussion, “On Passion, Realism and the Arts Career,” with her former teacher, Lauren Berlant. Hollywood Chicago spoke with Peirce about her thoughts regarding new indie business models, Apatowian comedies and her upcoming gangster picture, “The Knife.”

HollywoodChicago.com: Your original film choice for the Elder book was Fellini’s “8 1/2.” What struck you about that film?

Kimberly Peirce: The story structure was unusual to what I had seen before, and it really gave me a sense of permission. When I saw that [film], and saw that it had echoed a lot of the excess that I saw in my own family, it made that connection between making more personal movies as opposed to making movies that were completely devoid of your own personhood, and were these constructs that you saw at the theater that were more commercially minded. It was an early art film that I saw, but it was also emotional and sexual and personal. I obsessively watched “8 1/2” for many years just feeling that if I ever did any [film], it could be like this. “Boys Don’t Cry” isn’t really anything like it—maybe in some ways it is—but it was interesting what a profound impact it had on me. I wanted to do movies like that.



Kimberly Peirce will discuss how *The Godfather* changed her life at the Music Box on Oct. 16.

Photo credit: Kimberly Peirce

HollywoodChicago.com: “*The Godfather*” is also a highly personal film. What was it about Coppola’s style that you found so inspiring? You mention in the book that he told you about his admiration for “*Boys Don’t Cry*.”

Peirce: Yeah, I met him a couple times and he was very supportive. I think with Coppola’s best work, particularly “*The Godfather*,” there’s definitely realism to it and there’s an amazing attention to detail. But there’s also detail in a profound cinematic sense, even though the details are honest and true, like when Michael sits down in a leather chair. I took a class in the sound work that was done on that. It’s a realistic sound, but it’s amplified to be super-dramatic. So he’s always balancing those two. He also deals incredibly well with violence, both physical and emotional. Michael’s emotionally violent to his family, and I think you see that in both of my films. For me, it’s not enough to just have the physical violence, I have to understand what’s going on underneath. So I think that focus was really similar. Certainly he was dealing with the heavier and darker on an epic scale in those movies. In a way my next film, “*The Knife*,” has a little bit more in common in that it’s more of a thriller and it’s on a bigger canvas. Same thing—physical and emotional violence with a real story. Certainly “*The Godfather*” was inspired by real people that he maybe didn’t know but it was a real lifestyle that he was emulating. One of the reasons why it was so hard to do the film the way he wanted was [because] the studio kept trying to force upon him all kinds of choices like non-Italian people. Coppola was drawing from a culture that was really true to him.

HollywoodChicago.com: In the book, you discuss how Coppola allows the audience to experience events at the same instant as the characters, such as the moment where Michael’s lover, Apollonia, is killed. How do you feel this is achieved?

Peirce: Well, you bring up a really interesting topic. It’s interesting that you mention the explosion with Apollonia, because there’s also the moment in front of the hospital where Michael’s defending his father, and he tells the guy with the flowers to act like it’s a machine gun. He says, “Put your hands in your pocket,” and then Michael looks down and sees that the guy’s hands are shaking. Michael looks at his own hands and sees that they aren’t shaking. It’s a moment where Michael is amazed that he’s as confident as he wanted to be. I think that if you can achieve that: a. you’re not tipping your hat to the audience and b. you’re not manipulating them. I think when you watch a movie and it’s

time to cry and there's the music that's supposed to make you cry [coupled with] the narrative that's supposed to make you cry, you don't want to cry because it's all predetermined for you. The movie is ahead of you and it's trying to get you to do what it wants you to do versus the opposite where you're just trying to go along with the character. If you can bring your audience to a natural place where they feel what your character is feeling, you haven't preordained it. You aren't forcing it upon them. To me, that's what you always aim for—to have the audience be inside the protagonist's point of view as much as possible so they are experiencing the world as the protagonist does.

HollywoodChicago.com: Some artists in other mediums that you've revealed as inspirations on your work are photographers, particularly Man Ray. You also have a background in photography...

Peirce: I do. I quit University of Chicago where I was going to school and moved to Japan. I had my first camera, my first dark room and was just consuming all kinds of photography. Man Ray was one [photographer] I studied, [Henri] Cartier-Bresson was another...there's so many old ones. But particularly with Man Ray, it was the strikingness of the images. They were very graphic and very profound—kind of the opposite of Cartier-Bresson, who was trying to capture the moment.



Chloe Sevigny and Hilary Swank star in Kimberly Peirce's *Boys Don't Cry*.

Photo credit: Fox Searchlight Pictures

HollywoodChicago.com: There are several subtly impressionistic passages in "Boys Don't Cry." Do you consider Man Ray an influence on that film?

Peirce: Sure, and again, on my limited budget where I made due with what I had, we had to bring the [audience] from the hardcore reality that Brandon is in a female body yet he is imagining himself as a man. We had to go outside of the physical world and into his imagination, because that's where he resided, and that's also where the love story resided. So with very little money, the reason I would look to someone like Man Ray is it's not advanced CGI. It's a guy who's making due with very few instruments. Early on in my career, those sorts of filmmakers and photographers were really influential. I had a little membership to the Anthology Film Archives in New York where you had the cheapest kind of [equipment]. It wasn't even digital back then, it was just an animation camera that you could photograph films with, so I did a whole bunch of experimental filmmaking. It cost me three dollars an hour. Nowadays you would do it all with Photoshop or one of the visual effects programs. They were causing emotion with very simple means. I would look at a Man Ray photograph and just be flushed with emotion. My goal in making a film is to effect people and touch them. A lot of times you have to go outside of the realm of what's been done before and say, 'if I put these two images together and that gives me a sense of possibility,' it's like you're creating a language to entertain the audience.

HollywoodChicago.com: What is the current production status for "The Knife"?

Peirce: Well hopefully it's going to be shot very soon. I would definitely say next year we would hope to release it. It's pretty exciting because it's an action thriller. It's in the vein of "The Town" and "The Departed" and it's about a gangbanger who gets in very deep when [infiltrating] a gang. It's pretty much a suicide mission, so he crosses over to the FBI, but there's all these limitations to what he has to do in order to actually get protection from the FBI, so he goes back into the gang to get to the top. You've seen elements of that story before, so we really have to make sure that it's terrifying to you. Like Brandon, he could be exposed at any point.

HollywoodChicago.com: You mention in the book that a recurring theme in your work is the dilemma of the outsider desiring to become the insider. With the agent infiltrating the gang in "The Knife," would you say that theme applies to this film as well?

Peirce: Yeah, that's interesting you say that. The white FBI agent can only go so far into the African American gang, and the African American who's in the gang wants to get out but the only power he has is what he has to offer about the gang. So he has to go all the way back in and they have to work together. As he's moving up the chain, he starts thinking—because [race] does play into it—that the FBI agent may not have my back the same way the gang does. So it's really a [matter] of, 'I want to get out but I don't know that getting out is as good as I originally thought it was.' He's getting pulled in deep by both sides. So yeah, it's interesting that you brought that up. It's exactly like Michael at the beginning of "The Godfather." He's the outsider. He was a military hero, they don't want him in the gang and what happens? He ends up running the gang.

HollywoodChicago.com: What are your thoughts on the current state of queer cinema? Do you feel that it’s entered the mainstream?

Peirce: In the last decade, there’s definitely been so much more queer film being made. There’s so many more images of queer life out there in terms of on television with “Ellen,” and there’s queer characters now in “True Blood,” “Modern Family,” [etc.] The taboo has been broken. Almost all my friends say, ‘My kids have friends whose parents are queer.’ So I think it’s not only in the media, it’s everywhere in the culture.



Steve Carell stars in Judd Apatow’s *The 40 Year Old Virgin*.

Photo credit: Universal Pictures

HollywoodChicago.com: Rumor has it that you have an Apatow-produced comedy in development. Is that true?

Peirce: Yes, I am still connected to it. The reason why Apatow comedies work so great is because they’re raw, they show a subculture and they’re truthful. Even though there are formulas to it—obviously “40 Year Old Virgin” has a rise and a fall that you can recognize—Apatow always works with the same group of guys. When you watch that stuff, you feel like those are real people as opposed to when you go to a formulaic romantic comedy. Nothing about those films make you feel like those are real people onscreen who said those jokes. It feels like it’s been contrived. I think in many ways, great new queer cinema is coming out of real queerness, real experiences and real subcultures. That to me is where the movement seems similar to the Apatowian comedies.

HollywoodChicago.com: Apatow’s approach to depicting sexuality is hilarious in its rawness and awkwardness. In “40 Year Old Virgin,” the guys trying to get the virgin laid know as little about sex as he does.

Peirce: He’s portraying the guys as failures. These are the idiot guys who can’t get laid, and you actually see them fail, which you don’t see in your classic formulaic romantic comedy. It doesn’t feel like it was contrived in an office with a bunch of people who are figuring out what would sound funny. I know that with Apatow and those guys, it’s very autobiographical. Even if it isn’t his life story, he really believes in drawing from what’s really funny and what’s really real.

HollywoodChicago.com: When you served on the Sundance jury this year, you mentioned feeling hopeful about the “new indie model” that you had observed there. What was that model, and is it something you’re planning to follow with “The Knife”?

Peirce: Well I don’t know if it’s any different from your basic model where a person has a great story to tell and tries to get it told for the cheapest [price]. That’s the indie model. You just get it done any way you can. What we saw was a fall in the sale of those types of movies. They weren’t really selling for a couple years. I don’t know why exactly—maybe it was after the crash of the stock market. You didn’t have a lot of sales. I was in the jury for the dramatic competition which was phenomenal. I was amazed that you had movies made for \$300,000, movies made for \$800,000, movies made for \$1.2 million. Here I was walking into a theater and with very little means, people were telling stories again that were really moving. So it’s already amazing that people can get their hands on the money because after the fall of the stock market, that wasn’t happening. Then what amazed me was the flurry of buying. It’s an amazing deal for the studios if you think about it because I think they have a hard time making anything for under \$9 million. Here you have these movies that on the high end are made for \$2 or \$2.5 million. The only thing I got scared about is if not all those movies make it, there’s going to be a backlash where they won’t be bought again.

In terms of me and “The Knife,” it’s an interesting scenario. The studio owned the rights to the magazine article in “GQ” called “The Inside Man.” It was a great story, but the script that was developed from it wasn’t that great. I came in and said, “Okay this is how I see to make this movie.” Even though I had the movie, I still had to sell it to the people who owned it. So the writer, Vineet Dewan, and I just donated five months of our time and wrote the whole story. You can’t really pitch a 45-minute outline, so we wrote a 60-page scriptment, which is a screenplay and a treatment. We also made a graphic novel and we technically sold it to the head of production at Universal, even though they owned it. But what we did is very typical of the business right now. If you want to do anything that isn’t a franchise with a 1, 2, 3 and 4 behind it, you have to donate a ton of free time to get it happening. There’s a lot of free labor that’s going on with a lot of creative people, which is tough because we’re all earning less and we’re all working for free. If we love film, there’s a lot more that we have to do in order to get these

movies happening. Even if I’m working in the studio system with a major producer like Ron Howard and Imagine, I still have to work as if I’m an indie and I have to donate all this free time in order to convince the powers that be that this is a worthwhile use of their time and money.

They want these types of movies like “The Knife” because it’s like “The Town” and “The Departed.” You can make it for \$30 million and it will go on to make \$100 million, but it’s not really the business they’re in. In the business, you used to be able to just make a great movie and that was it. Now they don’t even look at it that way. They don’t want to do it unless they can make five great movies. Not even great—five profit-making movies. You talk to anyone in my business and that’s what you’re hearing. So are you willing to put in all this extra effort to tell stories that mean something to you? “The Knife” is a great story and I’ve been working with the real guys whose story it’s based on. That’s been really inspiring.



James Caan, Marlon Brando, Al Pacino and John Cazale star in Francis Ford Coppola’s *The Godfather*.

Photo credit: Paramount Pictures

HollywoodChicago.com: Do you feel female directors have become more embraced by the studios in the last decade?

Peirce: Well, I’m in an unusual position. With “Stop Loss,” I didn’t shop it around separately from when we wrote it as a greenlit spec script. It came out as an entity in and of itself. The studios, the financiers and the producers signed onto it as opposed to it being an open directing assignment where I’m a female doing male material. If I was out there looking for the jobs that men typically get, I would be coming up against obstacles, but because of the design of “Stop Loss,” I wasn’t in the position to find that out. Same thing with “The Knife.” It wasn’t an open directing assignment that was ready to go where it was me against all the guys. I came in and was like, ‘I know how to make your movie work.’ There may still be lots of gender hurdles but in these last two projects, I’ve skirted by them. But if look at the percentages of the women who are directing, it’s appalling. What I don’t want to do is make it sound like there isn’t a major problem.

HollywoodChicago.com: Kathryn Bigelow’s Best Director win at the 2010 Oscars may have caused this fact to get glossed over.

Peirce: Bigelow’s win was great, but you have to look at how many women are being hired to make movies. Bigelow did [“The Hurt Locker”] in a way that was very independent. How many women are being hired to do jobs that men are typically getting in the studio system? I don’t think it has changed at all. Six percent of all directing jobs are held by women, so I don’t think that it’s getting any better. Of course, there are these star women who do great and we’re happy for that. That doesn’t mean that the overall numbers are changing.

HollywoodChicago.com: What’s next for you besides “The Knife”?

Peirce: I have a miniseries called “The Enclave” for Fox TV and USA Studios, and am working with Andre and Maria Jacquemetton, who are the head writers for “Mad Men.” Were hopefully just about to get it greenlighted. It’s about an American family that relocates to an American compound in the kingdom of Saudi Arabia. There’s suspense and danger when the wife, a Pulitzer Prize-nominated journalist, loses her job after her newspaper uncovers a mysterious murder that may involve the company that her husband works for, the Saudi officials and the CIA.

HollywoodChicago.com: Do you feel that television offers directors more artistic freedom?

Peirce: I do think the freedom in making an independent film is extraordinary. If you go to the festivals and you see what’s being made, your mind will be blown and that’s great and healthy. The problem is, how many of those films can actually get distribution, and how many can actually make a profit, given the way release cycles work? That’s our biggest problem. There’s always going to be freedom if you’re willing to pay for your own movie. TV is not a substitute for independent film, even though TV in many ways is picking up some of the slack. I’m a TV nut that just finished “Downtown Abbey” and am finishing “Mad Men.” What’s great about TV are the characters, conflicts and human emotion. The writing is stellar. In many ways, you’re getting on TV what you can’t get at the movies. They don’t replace independent films, but they’re

making money at it. People are tuning in, they’re watching it at home, and TV companies are making money. Therefore, they can keep making that product because the audience has migrated to some extent. You’re seeing that most adult entertainment is at home. What are franchises aimed for? Certainly studios want to get at the four quadrants, but they are always aiming for the teenagers. That was not the concern before. “Mad Men” is not trying to get a huge teen girl audience like “Twilight.” They can have a limited number of people watching it and that can justify making it, which is brilliant. That’s what we want in the movies but we don’t have that. If we go to the studios and say, “Hey, can we make our movie for \$15 million?” they won’t think it’s worth it.

HollywoodChicago.com: Last year, films by Aronofsky, Russell and the Coens were outgrossing a lot of the mainstream products when they finally acquired a wide release. It’s been my hope that this will cause the studios to realize that there is an audience for the type of pictures that would often be relegated to art houses.

Peirce: That’s my aim. I’m not trying to make what I would call an art house film, I’m trying to make a movie for a price. What we’re saying to the studio is, ‘I get it, you guys have to make these huge movies. I’m not competing with that. But can we protect one revenue stream which is going to be adult movies made for a price? They’re not made for gazillions of dollars, they’re made for millions of dollars and they’re designed to make a profit and they’re good old-fashioned entertainment. Can we protect a certain amount of theatrical space for that?’ I’m in the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences and I’m in the DGA. This is something that we’re fighting to protect—the adult theatrical experience.

‘The Film That Changed My Life’ series presents ‘The Godfather,’ starring Al Pacino, Marlon Brando, James Caan, Robert Duvall, John Cazale and Diane Keaton. It was written by Mario Puzo and Francis Ford Coppola and directed by Francis Ford Coppola. It will screen Oct. 16 at the Music Box, followed by a discussion with Kimberly Peirce and Robert K. Elder.



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